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ABSTRACT

This research report compares parents' satisfaction about the quality of their eighth grade children's schooling with the children's mathematics achievement. The report uses data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS88). Despite low student achievement in mathematics as indicated by a study conducted in 1990, data from the NELS88 indicated that a large majority of parents of eighth grade students in public and private schools believed that their child's school was doing a good job of preparing students for high school and college. This was indicated for parents in general, and for parents of low-achieving students and students attending schools in high poverty neighborhoods in particular. Parents rely primarily on grades to determine how much their children are learning. In light of the fact, however, that 45 percent of students who scored in the bottom quarter of the NELS88 mathematics test reported getting mostly As and Bs on their report cards, parents cannot rely solely on their children's grades to determine the quality of their education. Parents need external standards against which they can assess the performance of their children and their children's schools. In mathematics, such standards have been developed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Parents can procure a copy of these standards and ask their children's teachers specific questions about grades and students' preparation for high school and college. (BC)

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Research Report

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Parental Satisfaction With Schools and the Need for Standards

The National Council on Education Standards and Testing has called for the development of a voluntary nationwide system of assessments tied to national standards for each of the five core subjects of English, mathematics, science, history, and geography. These standards represent what young Americans need to know and be able to do if they are to live and work successfully in today's world.

One question often raised is why we need national standards and a new system of voluntary assessments. Don't parents already have the information they need to make judgments about the effectiveness of their local schools?

There is evidence that they do not: despite clear indications that student achievement is low and widespread concern about this, most parents express satisfaction with their children's achievement and schools.

High Satisfaction vs. Low Achievement

What might explain this gap between low achievement and high satisfaction? In an international comparative study about the relationship between student achievement and parental satisfaction with schools, the authors found that "American parents face a number of serious impediments in judging the quality of their children's education. One of the strongest obstacles is the lack of clear external standards. American elementary schools generally do not provide grades; instead they offer parents an evaluation of their children's progress made since the last report. Or, the teacher may offer a broad classification such as *outstanding*, *satisfactory*, or *needs improvement*."

To further explore the issue of assessing achievement, this research report compares parents' satisfaction about the quality of their eighth grade children's schooling with the students' mathematics achievement, using data collected for the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS-88). Data from the 1990 mathematics assessment

conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are included for comparison.

This analysis focuses on math achievement because of its importance for today's students. Research indicates that both the number of courses taken and the level of performance in math impact students' future job prospects and earnings. This is the case for those who enter college and those who enter the job market. Both will need math in their jobs and to expand their careers just as they need it in their everyday lives. And, we know that students are neither taking very many math courses nor doing very well in them. According to the 1990 mathematics assessment conducted by NAEP:

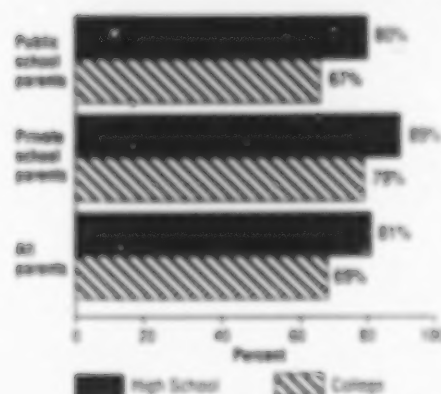
- One out of three eighth-graders cannot solve two-step problems using addition and subtraction and one-step problems using multiplication and division—problems typically taught at the upper elementary school level.
- 86 percent of eighth-graders cannot consistently solve problems involving fractions, decimals, percents, and simple algebra—topics generally introduced by the seventh grade.

Despite this low achievement, a majority of parents of eighth grade students surveyed for NELS-88—parents of public and private school students alike—believed that their own child's school was doing a good job of preparing students for further education.

- Four out of five parents of eighth grade students in public schools and nine out of ten parents of eighth grade students in private schools agreed that their child's school was doing a good job of preparing students for high school.
- Two out of three parents of eighth grade students in public schools and four in every five parents of eighth grade students in private schools agreed that the school was doing a good job of preparing students for college.

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Figure 1. — Percentage of parents agreeing that their eighth grade children's schools are doing a good job of preparing students for high school and college



The paradox of high parental satisfaction in the face of evidence of poor student performance suggests that most parents have no common standard against which they can judge their own children's achievement. We found that while parents whose children are not doing well in math (as measured by the NELS-88 achievement test) are somewhat less satisfied with their children's schools than are parents whose children are doing well, a majority still believe that their children's schools are doing a good job of preparing students for high school and college:

- 75 percent of parents of the lowest achieving students on the math test believed that their children's schools were doing a good job of preparing students for high school.
- 61 percent of parents believed that the schools were doing a good job of preparing students for college.

This pattern is true for both public and private schools. In fact, a greater percentage of the parents of the lowest achieving private school students believe that the school is preparing students well for college (70 percent vs. 60 percent).

What about parents of children in high poverty schools (i.e., schools with large concentrations of children from poor families)? Research has shown that children in high poverty schools are much more likely than other children to leave school unprepared for the work force or for further education.

Despite such low performance, according to NELS-88 data these parents are satisfied with the quality of their children's education:

- Three of every four parents of students in high poverty schools believed that the schools were preparing students well for high school.
- Nearly 60 percent believed that the schools were preparing students well for college.

What accounts for such a high level of parental satisfaction, when the children are doing so poorly? It may well

Table 1. — Parental satisfaction with schools, by eighth grade students' math achievement score

Math test quartile	All Parents	Parents of public school students	Parents of private school students
Percentage who agree or strongly agree with each statement			
<i>"The school is preparing students well for high school"</i>			
Total	81	80	89
Quartile 1 (low)	75	75	84
Quartile 2	80	79	86
Quartile 3	82	81	89
Quartile 4 (high)	88	87	93
<i>"The school is preparing students well for college"</i>			
Total	69	67	79
Quartile 1 (low)	61	60	70
Quartile 2	66	65	75
Quartile 3	70	69	79
Quartile 4 (high)	77	76	84

Table 2. — Parental satisfaction with their eighth grade children's schools, by school poverty level (public schools only)

Percentage of students in the school receiving free or reduced price lunch	Percentage of parents who agree or strongly agree that the school is preparing students well for:	
	High School	College
0	82	69
1-5	83	72
6-10	82	71
11-20	82	68
21-30	80	66
31-50	78	65
51-75	79	64
76-100	75	59

be that parents have limited ways of judging how well their children are doing. How do parents know if report cards filled with A's mean their children are learning what they should in the eighth grade? How do parents judge whether their children's eighth grade classes are challenging or mediocre?

Grades Do Not Tell Us Enough

Parents have to rely primarily on grades to determine how much their children are learning—and according to the grades, their children are doing well. A majority of eighth grade students surveyed by NELS-88 reported that they have received “mostly A's” or “mostly B's” in math from grade six through grade eight.

- 66 percent of public school students reported getting mostly A's or B's in math, and
- 75 percent of private school students reported doing this well.

Did two out of every three of the eighth grade students surveyed by NELS-88 really do well in math? While students who scored poorly on the NELS-88 math test

were less likely to report getting A's and B's than students who did well on the test, 45 percent of the eighth grade students who scored in the bottom quarter on the math test reported getting mostly A's and B's.

Parents may reasonably conclude from these grades that their children are doing well, when, in fact, the children may not be learning the math they need for further education and work in today's world.

Conclusions

Parents cannot rely solely on their children's grades to determine the quality of their education. In order to ensure that their children are receiving a world class education that prepares them for the 21st century, parents need external standards against which they can assess the performance of their children and their children's schools.

In math, curriculum standards have been developed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM). These standards identify the areas of math students should study in grades K through 12. Similar standards are being developed in other subject areas.

Table 3. — Percentage of eighth grade students reporting mostly A's and B's in math from grade six to the present, by control of school and math achievement score

Math test quartile	All Students	Public school students	Private school students
All students	67	66	75
Quartile 1 (low)	45	44	47
Quartile 2	58	58	63
Quartile 3	75	75	78
Quartile 4 (high)	90	89	92

Recommendations

Parents should ask their school principal for a copy of the NCTM standards and how they are being implemented in the school curriculum. While these standards provide guidance on what children should study in math, they do not provide parents with information on how well their children are doing. Therefore, parents may also want to ask their children's teachers about the education their children are receiving. For example:

- Is my child working at the appropriate grade level? If not, what help is my child receiving to work up to grade level?
- What does my child's grade of A or B mean? Is my child being measured against a standard or being compared to classmates?

- Are the students who get A's and B's in my child's eighth grade class well prepared for high school? What classes do they usually go into in high school?
- How well prepared are these students for college? How do you know that they are well prepared?
- Are the students who get A's and B's in my child's high school classes well prepared for work? What kinds of jobs do they get? Have you talked to their employers about additional skills they should be learning in high school to improve their job performance and career options?

Most important, parents should ensure that they have the information they need to judge what their children know and can do.

This *Research Report* is part of a series published by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement for teachers and parents. If you would like to suggest topics for a future *Research Report*, please write to: Office of Research, U.S. Department of Education, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Room 610e, Washington, DC 20208-5648. To be added to the *Research Report* mailing list, send your name and address to OERI *Research Report*, Outreach Office, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20208-5570. This report is a public document and may be reproduced in part or in its entirety without permission. Please credit OERI.

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Notes: (1) The data on student grades in this report are from the National Education Longitudinal Survey of 1988 (NELS:88). NELS includes surveys of eighth grade students, their parents, and their teachers, and provides information on family characteristics, school characteristics, and student achievement. (2) Tables of standard errors and numbers of cases are available on request.

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